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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001836

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: BUENAVENTURA'S SECURITY AND SOCIAL CRISIS

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer  
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Multiple illegal groups including the FARC, renegade ex-AUC, and narco-gangs are battling for control of the coca business in the port city of Buenaventura. Marines and Police quadrupled force strength, captured a host of gang bosses, and may have begun to turn the tide on crime. The GOC has committed funds from seized narco assets to resettle slum dwellers in public housing. Still, even with improvements in security and social services, a long-term turnaround depends on employment generation. The local police commander stressed the Free Trade Agreement was vital to future prosperity. End Summary.

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A Key Port - But Poor, Neglected, and Violent  
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¶2. (U) With the potential to be a prosperous engine of regional economic growth, Buenaventura island on the southwest coast is instead a blight of poverty, narcotraffic, and violence. Colombia's largest port handles 60% of national trade, but port income flows to outside owners while workers earn as little as \$20 a week (less than half the GOC's stipulated minimum wage). Of the city's 300,000 residents, more than 200,000 are Afro-Colombian. 70 percent of the population falls within the country's two lowest economic strata. 30 percent are jobless. Residents lack GOC basic services. These dynamics reinforce a Pacific Coast skeptical of authority and with a longstanding contraband tradition. Narcotrafficking has supplanted former legal industries like fishing, aided by Buenaventura's location at the mouth of several river networks -- ideal outlets for coca and inflow points for precursor supplies. The drug trade has spawned escalating violence, with a murder rate (134 per 100,000 inhabitants) more than triple the national average. Insecurity has deterred economic investment, creating a downward spiral of misery.

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Deadly Drug Wars  
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¶3. (C) Multiple illegal armed groups including FARC

militias, renegade ex-paramilitaries, local narco-cartels, and new criminal gangs are battling for control of Buenaventura's cocaine trade. FARC militias are urban arms of their coca-growing and war-fighting comrades in the hills, serving logistical functions related to finance, supply, and transport. Renegade paramilitaries engaged in crime are mainly those who did not demobilize or who demobilized but have re-armed to resist FARC pressure to join its militias. The local Marine commander told us that alliances have been formed with the competing leaders of the North Valle cartel: the FARC works with 'Don Diego' Montoya, while the renegade ex-AUC is allied with Wilber Varela. The city's violence is nearly all targeted homicides, driven by the battle between these groups for control of drug-related protection rackets and mobility corridors for coca transport. Homicides soared late in 2006: there were 63 in December (an annualized rate of 247 per 100,000), bringing the year's total to 404 violent deaths. The crisis attracted national attention, prompting President Uribe to order emergency security measures.

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Security: COLMAR / Police Surge  
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14. (C) Uribe ordered a battalion of Colombian Marines (COLMAR) to support the Police on urban patrols and counterdrug operations. "Joint Task Force Buenaventura" was formed early this year, with a short-term (perhaps three-month) surge of personnel to 1,200 Marines and 1,050 Police (four times the prior level of 571 Police). The COLMAR's regional brigade has a highly successful track record fighting drugs in the southwest, with seizures mushrooming from one kilo in January 2006 to 2,500 kilos in January 2007. It accounted for 80 percent of the Navy's national interdiction volumes last year. Military pressure through expanded patrols, extensive psyops outreach to recruit informants, and generous amnesty offers for demobilization began prompting surrenders. January 2007 netted 128 captures and 160 desertions. The COLMAR said, "Deserters told us that if the public forces maintain this level of pressure, the rest will demobilize too. Our current level of effort is asphyxiating them."

15. (C) Meanwhile Uribe's hand-picked new Police chief Colonel Yamil Moreno undertook a painstaking effort to capture gang bosses and break apart criminal structures. This began last December with a street-by-street analysis of gang territories, structures, and methods. A series of police raids then yielded captures of nine of the ten most wanted targets within a single month. Terrorist attacks in revenge for Police actions backfired: the local population was fed up and local residents began to denounce the attackers and offer tips for their capture. Desertions increased when captured leaders persuaded others to demobilize. In one case, alias "Luzbey" brought in 103 FARC militia. Murders of civilians declined to 45 in January, the same level as in January 2006, indicating a possible turnaround. Despite press reports highlighting 100 homicides by mid-March, this was an improvement on the rates late last year. "We're not far from the tipping point," said one COLMAR officer in mid-February.

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Social Welfare: Relief and Resettlement  
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16. (C) Military and civilian sources agreed the city's security crisis reflected a more fundamental problem -- an urgent need for social investment. COLMAR officers spoke of "palofito wars," referring to the slums built on stilts over the ocean, without potable water or electricity, and accessible only by boat. The Police described a fundamental breakdown of family structures, rampant unemployment, and lack of activities for youth. The city Bishop agreed these social ills were the root of the problem. To that end, the President has committed \$27 million found in drug caches to

build public housing on the mainland, resettle 3,000 families, raze the slums, and construct parks on the island's perimeter. This would be a first step towards eliminating the misery of Buenaventura's worst ghettos, and providing the city's youth with sports programs and other alternatives to gang life.

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Jobs: Key to a Sustainable Solution  
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17. (C) Once the security surge subsides, and even when slums are resettled, an economic program is essential for Buenaventura. Otherwise, criminal networks will quickly regenerate. A turnaround depends not only on security and social relief, but on jobs. One hurdle to economic investment, cited by the Bishop, is a notoriously corrupt city government. He said the GOC must do more to share the port's wealth, perhaps through the promotion of light industry to benefit from available labor and low transport costs for exports. The local region is rich in legal industries like fishing, wood, and agriculture. As the Police commander said, "We can't fight poverty with guns.... The Free Trade Agreement is the future of this port."

Drucker